


2007-04-07

The Feel-Good Gulag: the value of the arts

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Recommended Citation

Kilroy, Ian (2007) The Feel-Good Gulag: the value of the arts, Dublin: the Arts Council of Ireland.

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The Feel-Good Gulag

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Introduction

The Public and the Arts (2006) study was commissioned by the Arts Council / An Chomairle Ealaíon to provide information on the current behaviour and attitudes of Irish people to the arts.

The study finds that public attitudes to the arts are very positive and that attendance levels are above international norms. Current patterns of attendance, participation and purchase are revealed, as well as private 'consumption' of arts and culture via an increasing range of media. However the study also showed some apparently contradictory findings – the public (as reflected in samples taken by the study) consider the arts to be important, even if they do not personally attend at formal arts events. This has prompted consideration of the many ways in which the arts influence day to day life, albeit sometimes invisibly.

Arising from the study the Arts Council / An Chomairle Ealaíon has asked a range of commentators to give their opinions and perspectives on *The Value of the Arts*. These pamphlets are intended to provoke discussion and to focus attention on the crucial role the arts can and do play in our lives as individuals, as members of diverse communities and as part of our wider society.

The Feel-Good Gulag

ONE day in 1942, at his flat on 122 Morehampton Road, Dublin, the poet Patrick Kavanagh had a visit from two members of An Garda Síochána. Kavanagh's uniformed callers had come to question the poet about the recent publication of extracts from his poem *The Great Hunger*, in Frank O'Connor's periodical *Horizon*. As the story goes, allusions to masturbation in the poem had provoked the ire of the Censorship Board; and so the boys in blue were dispatched.

Now, while the outcome of the visit was a happy one for the Ulster poet, resulting only in him being christened "the Monaghan wanker" by Brendan Behan, what the episode does highlight is the importance placed on art by the powers of the state. Anyone familiar with Soviet history will know the value that thugs and dictators place on works of art. However, the misconception today is that these dark forces are a thing of the past, that they belong only to a time of black and white footage, high-nelly bicycles and damp, black crombies. But control over artistic expression is still something fought over and contested, today as much as ever.

The difference now, however, is that control is exerted with private and commercial pressures, limiting the artistic discourse to what is deemed mainstream, mercantile, and therefore sane. You see, you don't always have to threaten the gulag on someone to get what you want. The machinations of power are subtle and insidious. Censorship is done with the quiet word, rather than the truncheon.

What is certain is that the value of art is not in doubt for the censor. The despot understands art's potential power to move and persuade, to embody values or dissent. Plato may have considered art to have had "no true or healthy aim", and banished it from his Republic, but Kant and the eighteenth century brought it back.

To Shelley, for example, poets were "the founders of civil society". Likewise, Friedrich Schiller, in his *Theatre Considered As A Moral Institution*, saw art as the crucible of the nation. Art constructed unity and played down dissent, he argued, and Yeats followed suit over a century later: "There is no nationality without literature" he proclaimed. Ireland would be dreamed into being. Like the *filí* of old, the artist would be honoured by the state. In return for his praise, the bard received patronage – be it from Yeats' new Saorstát or, in another time and place (and in a very different context), Stalin's Soviet Republic.

From the eighteenth century onwards, the arts had a renewed, important role. They worked as a "civilizing, moral influence" on the population at large. In short, they were effective state propaganda. And it's within that paradigm that the arts continue to thrive today, albeit in a new context.

"The importance of cultural identity was never more relevant than now in times of increased globalisation," the Minister for Arts, Mr John O'Donoghue said recently. It is as a marker of identity that the arts are valued. But why should this

be the case? The Minister goes on: "If our artists do well internationally, the benefits will be real and wide-ranging," he says. The sub-text here, of course, is that the benefits accrued lie outside the artistic sphere. They are prizes won in the global marketplace. In other words, they further the aim spelt out on the Department of Arts website: that the arts stimulate and help maximise "economic returns and employment". There is no idea here of intrinsic worth, everything is utilitarian. The victory of Friedman's economics is total.

Under this schema, everything is acceptable, as long as it has a market function. There is only one reason the police might be dispatched to Kavanagh's door today, and that is if his poem threatened the GNP. Likewise, there is now only one true marker of success, and that is financial.

"He's a great novelist. His first novel sold 500,000 copies and he netted a three book deal for over one million euro."

In the choreography of contemporary Ireland, artists are locked in a tight, twirling Riverdance with the state and its official ideology. The neo-Yeatsian jargon of the last century has taken over the creative space.

"We Irish" are a Celtic people with an artistic temperament. You can get a feel for it at www.tourismireland.com. In short, an understanding of the arts that was mobilised to aid a struggle for independence from the British Empire continues to be mobilised for other reasons. Yeats' marginal discourse is now mainstream. The Tiger is "Celtic", rather than "Irish". Its

iconic language is a mis-mash of James Joyce and bodhráns, *In The Name of the Father* and U2. As Haughey intended, the artist is firmly in bonded service to the grandeur of the state. Unknown to himself, the artist is incarcerated in the feel-good gulag. It is a place that is aboriginal and market-savvy at the same time. It is worldly and wealthy. Its receding colonial history frees it from the first-world guilt that its privileged, pro-American status should otherwise provoke.

That explains the lack of a Christy Moore for this generation, lambasting the state for beating the Rossport people off the public roads, for allowing the US use Shannon as a springboard for torture. Where is this generations' Robert Ballagh, depicting the police battering the May Day marchers, satirising the decision to run a road through ancient Tara? Is a Paul Durcan still possible in a 'successful' Ireland? Someone who could satirise the cynical reburying of Kevin Barry with pomp and fanfare? Or has the torpor of the feel-good gulag rendered our artists silent?

And yet, as censorship shows, the fear of the *file* persists. That a well-aimed lampoon can raise boils on the face of its victim is a power that is still respected. But in the feel-good gulag, criticism and comic caricature are not encouraged. You see, my dear artists, we have never had it better.

If that were the case, we'd be in the middle of a Medici-like renaissance right now. This great wealth would be patronising the beautification of the public sphere. So, where are the great works? The latter day Medici developing all the new property in the state seem not to be embracing the role.

Where is the art that adorns our sprawling suburbs?

The miniscule Per Cent for Art spent on public projects is not enough to place art and aesthetics at the very centre of what Ireland is becoming. In boom-time Ireland, that our flagship National Theatre has languished so long in indecision is proof of the point. For the state to project an image of itself as a centre of artistic excellence is an act of pure hypocrisy.

But it is not only in the public sphere that art has value, but also in that private and vulnerable part of ourselves that is moved or changed by its encounter with art. We are changed by a piece of music or become emotional when a poem works on us. But art as expression is always expressing something to someone, and is therefore always an act of communication, and like language, is public in character.

Like language, too, there is a grammar and rules to the various art forms. This grammar is employed when assigning value and meaning to artistic expression. Certain works appear to have a universal grammar, in that they can be enjoyed at almost any time and in many different cultures. And within the rules of the system, original sentences and phrases can be formulated that have never been formulated before, almost to infinity.

As for individual works, they are made in the context of a tradition – almost like conversations over time between various artists. Or, indeed, they can be the rejection of a tradition or the start of a new one.

Almost everyone has the capacity for language, although some are better speakers than others. And art, like language, has different registers and is open to corruption. It can be twisted into 'Newspeak' and mobilised as propaganda.

Art, then, is just as valuable as language. It is another kind of speaking, bringing our inner thoughts and feelings into the public sphere, it is another expression of our humanity.

But, like language, art can also be the vehicle for lies. It can be imbued with ideology, particularly when it is placed at the service of identity construction, nation-building, or myth-making. Of these processes, art and artists should always be suspicious.

And yet artists are courted by the nation, by politicians – because men and women of state know the value of art and the prestige it bestows. They know it can be absorbed into the arsenal of power, and simply ignored when it is of no use.

In the long run, the state devalues art because it employs it for utilitarian and cynical purposes. The power of a work of art is diluted by its prostitution to the grandeur of the state. The artist is far better being what Don DeLillo termed himself, a "bad citizen" – one that speaks his mind lyrically and on his own terms, offering an individual testament in the service of nothing other than the truth of the artistic act itself; and often, ultimately, although ironically, contributing to the health of the democracy in the process.

Nothing could be more subversive. The individual, artistic conscience is uncontrollable; it creates work that “releases our suppressed subconscious, drives us to a kind of potential rebellion”, as Artaud said. It is a rebellion that is the complete antithesis of the conformism that never has a hand in history.

Art is freedom itself: beyond propaganda, but not beyond politics. Beyond the material conditions of life and its comforts, beyond the official doctrine of the feel-good gulag. It is imagination itself, where even the inmate can shake off his sedation and dream up a reality beyond his comfortable cell. In the end, it is the kind of thing that brings the policemen calling.

Ian Kilroy, **April 2007**

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